

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY**

**INFORMANT: KEN GUERTIN
INTERVIEWER: DOUGLAS REYNOLDS
DATE: JANUARY 25, 1989**

**G = KEN GUERTIN
R = DOUGLAS REYNOLDS**

SG-BV-T117

[there is continual static throughout tape and speakers often are not talking into recorder, making it difficult and often impossible to understand what they are saying]

R: This is an oral history interview of a Kenneth Guertin, conducted in Whitinsville, January 25, 1989. Oh, I'm really sorry. [clunking noise]

G: Well. Okay what are you going to do? You going to start from number one? (R: Yeah) Ohhh!

R: Okay you were, you were born in Milford, right? what year was that?

G: 1930. (R: 1930) Born in 1930. [unclear] born in Milford. [unclear] Milford Hospital [unclear]. I always lived up in North Uxbridge. I was married in 1954. I uh, I guess I moved to the town of Northridge. It was way out in the country. I was, had one acre there with, uh surrounded by three big farms. You know so it was really way out.

R: Then this was your land? (G: Hm?) This was your land?

G: My, my one acre, and a half of my land. The house had been there maybe thirty, forty years [unclear] foundation. [unclear]. And I stayed there about three years. Then uh, we moved here. We had a big flood. (R: Fifty-five?) The flood of fifty-five? Right. [unclear]. That was the first year I was there. But then uh, couple more years the State come along, and they put a [unclear] dam and so forth. So my house was moved. They moved my house [unclear]. Which in a way is, was kind of a break, because they bought my house for \$12,000. Sold it back to me for 625 sou when I moved. So I come out ahead and within a couple of years my mortgage was paid. And so it felt good I guess. Although I did like where I was in my other home. And uh, I did start work in the shop [unclear] 1947.

R: As a helper?

G: Stockroom personnel. I mean it was a job, you stocked [unclear]. [unclear] be that way. Stayed there until I went to uh school out in Denver, Colorado. Gunsmith [unclear]. Custom gunwork and all that. I learned all kind of machinery out there, too and stuff like that.

R: That was in what, 1949 or something?

G: Forty-eight, forty-nine. [unclear]. Came back, went in the shop, became a grinder hand. That was a night job also. [unclear] nine months to a year. Then I had an opportunity to uh go to Linwood Mills. That was one of our [unclear] at the time. [unclear].

R: [unclear] Linwood is up around 122 isn't it? Yeah

G: That brick building over there used to be part of the complex. I worked for them quite a few years. [unclear] well I worked there while I was going through high school you see. Maintenance man of the building, as far as building maintenance. Replacing windows and stuff like that. That was before I started the shop. Uh, I stayed there until I was drafted.

R: In 1953, right?

G: Uh fifty-one. (R: Fifty-one) Yeah, fifty-one to fifty-three. Well I came back in the shop after uh my discharge.

R: Just for a [unclear] , where, where, where did you get sent K-, sent to in Korea? (G: Hm?)

G: No, I was, let me s-, let me put it this way. They sent my whole outfit over there, [pause: 3 sec.] but I didn't have to go. Remember I told you I went to gunsmithing school? (R: Yeah) They kept me an ordnance man and a gun instructor all the time. So it was a good deal for me. (R: I see) You know, I had a, I had this here in my background and uh, no problem.

R: And where did they send you? (G: Hm?) Where did they send you?

G: Oh I spent most of my time at Fort [unclear]. (R: Oh) [unclear] artillery, Sandia, and you know Chafee, Arkansas. But all, you know, [unclear] stateside. I was afraid to go to Turkey once, but I [unclear] I ran out of time. I would have had to sign up for another six months and I chose not to. (R: Yeah) So. But then I took the apprentice course. [unclear] took the test. [unclear] to be a maintenance machinist. First four years were the same type of course [unclear]. Um, there was a question whether I wanted to [unclear] machines [unclear] all over the plant. And kind of like that. (R: Hm) Uh that was an asset to a union job. You're all over the plant, you used to meet everybody.

R: Yeah, [unclear]. (G: Right) Did you disseminate a [Mr. Guertin coughs] lot of union information? [Mr. Guertin clears throat] As, in that position? Is that (- -) [Mr. Guertin coughs]

(G: What's that?) Did you disseminate a lot of union information in that position? (G: I just, well) [unclear] described [the place] [Mr. Guertin coughs] as a beehive.

G: Hmm. It's uh, well we had more attendance at the meetings in those days and uh, awful lot of grievance uh men and stewards, and they all attended. Everybody knew just what was happening. (R: Yeah) [coughs] It wasn't a question of uh, were we trying to organize. It was, they came, we come in in 1945. (R: Yeah) You know. Although, at that time people had their choice, whether they wanted to belong or not. I can't think of what the year was that we became an agency shop. [clears throat] But any new person would have to belong. Those who were there had their choice of belonging or not, but they still had to pay a fee, (R: Yeah) so. This is, uh, this wasn't troublesome to get from the company I don't believe. They wanted a little stability, too [unclear] set up [unclear]. It wasn't [unclear] we had to drag out [unclear].

R: Now was that the case before you went to Korea? [Mr. Guertin coughs] I mean we, we have a very bitter strike here in, in the early fifties. (G: Um hm) How, how do you interpret that? [unclear] it was at that time that the company finally decided that [unclear].

G: Um hm. Well I guess they had their first strike in uh forty-five. (R: Yeah) Fifty-two. Well I don't think it was uh, well John might have told you what some of the issues were in that strike. It's not what, I don't think, it's not a question of you know could we organize or could the union stay or not because it was already here. I think the strike was something to you know increase wages. [unclear]. [clears throat]

R: How did the community change after um the union got in? What changes did you see?

G: Well, I, I think there was opposition from a lot of people. Say some of the old, old Yankees or whatever. [chuckles] I don't know how else would you describe them. The unions were accepted more or less by the immigrant families: the Polish, the Irish, and the French. Because they were the workers and they were in it and (- -) I guess uh you know, unions are built with what is. Still I would rather uh have somebody help me. (R: Yeah; right) Hm, sh-, suppose they work together to help each other you know. To get our fair share.

R: What, what about some of the things that uh Whitinsville provided for the community here? Say housing and, and other stuff.

G: Well that's more or less in John's time, or so, you know. (R: Yeah) Yes I'm sure in those days, before the union, uhh (- -) If your boss found somebody, if you were fired, your whole family was out in the street. Right out of that house, you know.

R: Where did your father work?

G: My father? (R: Yeah) Ah, he used to work in the New England Power. He was an engineer at the [unclear]. [unclear] Uxbridge. The later years, he did spend about fourteen years as the stationary engineer down in Louisville. [unclear] power plant [unclear]. But he never uh, my father was never in the union because [unclear].

R: Okay, well, to get back to this, this housing thing with uh, (G: Hm) what, what else do you remember changing at that time?

G: Well the uh, company started to uh, let go of their holdings as far as real estate. (R: [unclear]) They started selling uh their property off to different tenants, and some of these four and six family houses they, they offered them for sale. They'd start by going to the one who had been there the longest you know. So they must have been actually taking our plan of seniority, whatever. [chuckling] They had their first choice and if they opted not to buy [unclear] next family [unclear].

R: Yeah. Did, did they let these homes go cheap or uh, at, at market rates or (- -)

G: I think they were, maybe market rate. Well, right now you'd say, God they were giving them away, but that, you know, prices those days uhh.

R: [unclear].

G: Oh yeah. Comparatively so. Although I think right now [unclear] so much higher [unclear].

R: Well, what about other things? I-I'm thinking of things like fire department, cemetery.

G: Well, yeah I would say the company here had quite a bit of control of the town. Well, the Whiting family, Whitinsville. (R: Yeah) It is the town of Northridge but uh you can see even the telephone book with a Whitinsville exchange. They were always there at the town hall, always at the town meeting. We'd hold their shops for them. They'd go down if something had to be taken care of. But they had money uh, they used to fund this, you know they more or less were uh godfathers I guess at the time.

R: Did they stop doing a lot of this in the fifties? (G: Hm?) Did they stop doing a lot of this in the nineteen fifties?

G: I don't know if they s-, well they stopped doing it, but I don't know if they did it out of their own volition. They just uh, ohh, you know people started to uh have more say as to what's going on in their town. [unclear].

R: How did people in the town feel?

G: Well, I think they uh took a little pride in that they were doing it themselves. [pause: 3 sec.] Speaking the way I think I see it now, I uh (- -) [pause: 5 sec.] The fellow that, E.J. Swift, that name must have been mentioned a few times (- -)

R: Ken Swift.

G: Ken Swift. Uh, [pause: 3 sec.] he used to be able to go around that plant, [unclear] sit on a barrel, and he'd talk about all the [unclear]. You know, very good, fatherly person, friendly, he

never, naturally he [unclear] union [unclear]. But he would talk to me a lot. [unclear] his summer camp was close to my house. He'd come sit on the wall. I'd never talk shop with him. Just about the deer in the fields, or something, and the fishermen. I went up to Tufts Medical in Boston. This is aside. And one of my children. Getting off the elevator the door was ajar to this conference room, and he was up there making a presentation to about forty, fifty industrialists. He spotted me, you know? And he held the meeting up for a while, he says, "See my neighbor? I want to talk to him." [laughing] So I, geez, all these people, I mean, business, he come out there, and he talked to me and my wife, and he says, "Hi, neighbor! How are you doing?" I almost forgot that. An oddball you know. I just couldn't believe it. The guy was just so [unclear]. Yeah he was a kind person in that respect. He was hardnosed against unions because it's, it's his company, he ran it you know. He knew what was best for you. (R: Yeah)

R: Why do think he ran all those housing and other programs? (G: Hmm?) Why do you think he ran all these, this, all these, you know paternalistic programs like low-rent housing and things like this?

G: Ahh, I think he liked control of the help.

R: It was just control?

G: I don't (- -). That's maybe one thing. I-I, I think he had a good heart in a way you know. Of course I'm kind of [unclear] people out in the street [unclear] that's (- -)

R: He didn't, he didn't say much about that did he? (G: Hm?)

G: No, he uh, he had people working as administrators and that [unclear] aside from it.

R: Okay, so you ran a, the apprenticeship program in 1953 and 1954 and you were in there until fifty-nine, right? (G: Um hm) Well, what did you learn about? Talk, talk about being a machine repairman.

G: Well, there isn't a machine in the shop that I didn't run. Every department I had to serve a three month period. I was familiar with all the machinery in the plant.

R: This was all textile producing machinery or had they started bringing in printing equipment?

G: [clears throat] This was machinery to build machines. (R: Okay, machinery to [unclear]) You could machine tools. I mean you could build textile or you could build printing presses. It don't matter you know, (R: Yeah) you could, well, you could build automobiles really. It just that you had to have a working knowledge of all the machinery if you were goint to repair them. (R: Yeah) Hard to repair something if you don't know what it's functions are. (R: Yeah) What's it supposed to do?

R: Were a lot of the skilled workers active in the union?

G: [pause: 3 sec.] Not as much as the uh, I don't want to say laborers but uh, machinists but not, not the really skilled labor. Because what was it now, I'd say uh, well later down the line, maybe in the middle sixties, they merged. The AF of L/CIO.

R: Fifty-five.

G: Was it fifty-five? Yeah, because I know I was going to those meetings. [unclear] judging by what I know [unclear]. CIO was our union down here, and the AF of L more or less was leaning towards the skilled help. Of course I'm saying this here's coming through the apprentice program, being a maintenance machinist. It's something that maybe people have criticized me for in the past, during some political campaigns, that I might favor the skilled help. I try not to.

R: That's an old charge. (G: Hm?) That's an old charge. (G: Yeah) Walter Reuther was a tool and die worker. (G: Um hm) Or so he said. [chuckles]

G: Well this is uh, this was from an art-, I, I ran election, once ran for president, way back when and lost. God, I had fifteen hundred votes and I still lost. That's how big the union was.

R: Was there any talk about skilled workers going over to the IAN or other AFL activities.

G: Other locals tried to get in. Machinists Union tried to get in. [unclear] final vote [unclear].

R: It, was this before the merger or after [unclear] was going on?

G: No this was while we were organizing [unclear]. (R: I see)

R: I wanted to raise some other issues associated with this. In the late nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties we have the CIO carrying on a red scare campaign. Was there an-, was that, was that occurring here in Whitinsville?

G: No. No I can't say that [unclear]. There were a few, [unclear] kind of a few people in town who were accused and things like that, but I, it never touched the [unclear]. It did on a higher level but not [unclear]. (R: Um hm)

R: What about uh in the fifties when the culture at large was after unions for being Communist dominated?

G: We never felt it here. You know we never considered ourselves you know any, well, our constitution says you can't be a member of the local if you're a member of the Communist party.

R: That's the local constitution or (- -)?

G: Hm? No, our International. (R: The International) [unclear].

R: Uh, okay how, how, wha-, I guess (- -)

G: I might not be a good interview, I, I don't know. I just uh (- -)

R: No, this is, this is going fine. Uh, why, why was this, then? I mean everywhere across the country we had, your local chamber of commerce types pointing fingers at the union. Uhh, you know saying, "That's the Communists." But that didn't, especially with CIO unions, and that didn't occur in Whitinsville. How did the Chamber of Commerce types react to the union's presence, presence here?

G: Well, the, the shop was so big, we had so many people, that our people also served on these boards in town. We were town government also, you know? So this issue was never really raised. N- (R: Hmm) We're not going to criticize ourselves.

R: That's real interesting. (G: Um hm) Yeah. [unclear]. Did you continue to see yourselves as being a, a one company, one horse, one mill owner town, after the union came in?

G: [pause: 3 sec.] Your question, I don't know if I quite follow it. (R: Okay) Percei-, perceive ourselves as a one (- -)

R: I, everybody I've talked to about this says before the union, and they all use the same phrase, they say it was feudal. That, that it was serfdom here. And at first I thought that was the union. I thought the organizers had done a good job you know. But I got, I got mill owners out here saying this, too.

G: We, they are other mills and companies that want to come in and this company stopped it. (R: Yeah) Made it very difficult for somebody coming into town. They wanted the whole ballgame. (R: Yeah) [unclear] be uh would come from others, not o-, not only union, but from everywhere. (R: Yeah) So.

R: Well, that's real interesting. What, what kind of perceptions about American democracy came out of this movement then? Uh, I mean here we have actual workers taking over for the first time town meetings, and taking back control of the city hall. Was there any larger perception of, of what the union came to mean?

G: I don't know, I don't know if [unclear] of the union was given credit for any of this, although at regency we encourage our people to write [unclear]. I don't know. I know arguments were quite prevalent in some of these town boards. Labor's obviously more liberal, [unclear] conservatives. [laughs and says something unintelligible]

R: Yeah, well, these are abstract questions here. (G: Um hm) There is no right and wrong [unclear]. Um, let's get back to, to more concrete things. Let's talk about what your union contract meant to your daily work. You were talking about how they came to standardize wages and classifications. (G: Um hm) How was the grievance procedure used once this was in place? How did the two relate?

G: I tell you we had a grievance procedure if uh [sighs], if something in question it's, contracts are not always black and white, you know. The intent is there on one party and the other, and that's where we sit down and try to hash it out. But uh, the employee does have somebody to go to if he thinks he's being wronged. He goes to talk to his foreman or his steward. Try to resolve it immediately, you know. (R: He's got a problem) He's got a problem. Um, [unclear] file a written grievance, get the answer and have a hearing, step two.

R: You were a steward weren't you? You started as one?

G: I handle all the grievances now. President. I write all the grievances, and (- -) Well, President's supposed to be Chairman pro tem of all committees so I (- -)

R: Did you ever uh use the grievance procedure to make a larger union point? Did you ever flood management with one type of grievance for example?

G: [pause: 5 sec.] It's part of using their own contract that different foremen would administer it different. You know. I think after we stepped away from the bargaining table and shook hands, that we more or less knew where we stood. There was always gray areas of course. I think you're doing the job if you're doing fifty-fifty maybe, you know? [laughs] Ahh, some grievances are frivolous. We uh, some of these grievances are not grievances you know. Because [unclear]. I'd like to think if a person, even if he loses, he knows a good effort was made by all concerned for him. (R: Yeah)

R: What about foremen? Did they lose the power to hire and fire? Were they more cautious as, as the process was established?

G: Ahh, well if the foremen, I mean, I-I mean charge has really got to be serious to fire a person. He's supposed to get a, oral warnings, three written warnings, week off, you know, the procedure before he goes up, [unclear] discharge. I can't remember an out and out discharge, but uh if it did, certainly i-it would not be automatically, it'd be in grievance pro-, process for months.

R: That's, that's a big contrast compared to, you were talking about how all of a sudden [unclear] (G: Um hm) could be on the street. What about the impact of new technologies? Did you have uh, new a-, new machinery? (G: Did we have what?) New machinery introduced. You know the uh ST (- -)

G: Oh we've had new machinery in the last fifteen, twenty years. American Control.

R: How is that? [unclear]

G: Computerized American Controls you know. How, how's what?

R: How has that changed uh working life in the plant?

G: Uh, well, it's supposed to simplify machine, but a person has to have a little more

knowledge to uh, to handle this. (R: Mm)

R: Are you guys trying to compete with an MC or is there an (G: Oh yeah) apprenticeship? You are? Who's the [unclear], the union? And the company.

G: Well, we haven't had too many uh as far as training goes. These new machines [unclear] I remember the time we started the people from the company who sold the machines. [unclear] they'd come in, teach the uh operator and maybe sometime we'd send for their service crew. Until they were somewhat proficient and they'd been running awhile. Until we put another, [unclear] become a hand, set up and that, another operator would come in and take it from there and learn it, and when he knew it maybe he would go nights [unclear] on the same machine. We trained from within. (R: Yeah) No structured classrooms.

R: What about uh, [unclear] what do you think this machinery, wha-, do you think it was as efficient as the old style tool and die work used to be?

G: Well, the concept is supposed to be. But, you say tool and die makers, [both talk; unclear] I thought [unclear].

R: I'm sorry, the machinists who, who uh (- -)

G: Yeah [unclear] these machines [unclear]. They u-, they usually are production machines. (R: Yeah) Uh, tool and die is still maybe done the old way. (R: Yeah) There's a lot of hand fitting and (- -)

R: I guess what I'm driving at here is, is, we had Lindsey Equipment come in and, and displacing old machinists jobs, right? (G: Um hm) What, how does, do you [both talk; interviewer unclear]

G: Well the people that were on the older machines were given the first opportunity to learn the new ones.

R: Did they do it?

G: Well, if they had any, quite a few years left they would. Say if a person was looking to retire in another year and a half, he'd say, "Forget it. (R: Yeah) I'll stick with what I done," you know. It's been very costly though as far as repairs and breakdowns on the new machinery though.

R: Has it been a lot more competitive?

G: Does it make it more competitive? If they're running, fine. You know? But there's so many uh reasons why they're down.

R: [unclear]?

G: Well, all of these um, this machinery today is supposed to be uh controlled environment. They're not, they're just out of the shop [unclear] regular machinery, dust you know. All these cards and circuits and [chuckles] you know, you don't know where the trouble starts. It's um, most of that end is taken care of by our electronic repairman, or electricians.

R: Are they in the union? (G: The rest, hm?) Are those guys, electricians, in the union?

G: Let's see this, everyone's in the union. P&M. And um, just a couple years ago all the officers retired in the L&T, [unclear]. The Office and Technical Union joined ours. We in the amalgamate, we, we're all one union now, although we're still working with two separate contracts.

R: [unclear] the uh, the office workers union? (G: Yeah) What union was that?

G: Well, O & T, Office and Technical. See they just joined us because they were getting small and they had no one who really wanted to join the office. [unclear] join us. [unclear]. (R: Yeah) [unclear].

R: So I think this is, technology issue is real interesting. Here we have new equipment coming in which is supposed to keep the company competitive, and yet, yeah you're saying, "It's a joke."

G: Uhh, I think this is a [unclear]. The old time maintenance machinists are saying it this way. Probably just don't want to admit. Uh, so far, all these MC machines are down, and it's so expensive to repair them. We were part of White Consolidated, before we went to local management here. You must have read that somewhere along the line. [coughs] So we had to buy equipment that was within the White Consolidated group. (R: I see) Like some Strand machines, the uh Omni Mills. We owned Gifford drills instead of the old Allard drills. Uhh, we were all somewhat subsidized within the uh, uh White Consolidated. But now that we're, been separated, you want to repair parts, [unclear] pay money. We paid much less before when we were part of [unclear].

R: You [unclear] a lot more repair parts now, too that you're on [unclear]. (G: Um hm)

G: We always have outside service people. (R: Yeah)

R: Okay. N-, now you were working in the plant in the late nineteen fifties. In 1959 [unclear]. What, what happens then? Oh, you're elected treasurer, right?

G: Yes. [unclear] in charge of the local. And uh, things started to slow down. A lot of people were laid off. [unclear] maintenance machinist (R: Yeah), but I held my job because I had top seniority as union treasurer. You know. Yeah, a few people resented it. (R: Yeah) You know.

R: What was the cause of this? General uh recession in the late nineteen fifties?

G: I would say so. I don't know the exact date the textile left us, but it uh, we had it quite a bit longer. [unclear] started to go in sixty-eight. [pause: 5 sec.] Those plants used to started slow, but we, but you know now [unclear].

R: Did [unclear] open up a plant in uh, in his house somewhere?

G: Yes. They had had a plant down there, for years.

R: North Carolina, wasn't it? (G: Um hm)

G: Well, that was quite a story there, when John tried to organize them. A few other people. He planned to organize the South you know. [unclear]. It was pretty vicious down there. The South was hard to organize.

R: Do you know when that was? (G: Hm?) Do you know when he did that?

G: Oh I could do some, probably dig up those old articles. (R: Yeah) You know. Because it even had repercussions up here. Well, the president of the union [unclear] organize [unclear]. Well, when I find out just what you're looking for maybe I can dig a little deeper to (R: [unclear]) help you out.

R: There's a question here that's, that's entered my mind. It seems like [unclear] Machine Works, [unclear], Draper, they all opened plants in the South. And then they started shipping uh, equipment south. They started operating these mills. And then they're complaining because northern wages are higher. I-it seems to me that they set something up here [unclear] competing against themselves. You know I mean they're using, they're playing one [unclear] market off against the other. [unclear]

G: That's what uh, I don't know like s-, it had to be [unclear], they figured [unclear] could be made cheaper down there. [unclear]. So the skills weren't there and it would take years to uh [unclear] people around. Anyway, well, them textile days are gone. It's uh, it was a heyday, but (- -)

R: They never organized that plant in North Carolina then, did they?

G: I thought they had, but I, I don't know just how to find it. I, I'll go find that for you. That's (- -) [pause: 5 sec.] [unclear].

Well, I don't know what happened down south. But today I, I know, but even when I first took over in eighty-one, [unclear]. World War II? Three shifts. Right, around the clock. Five thousand [unclear].

R: What do you think of [unclear]?

G: In our (- -)

R: Yeah. Like, like [unclear].

G: Why did they lose the textile? That's a question I've often asked myself. Everybody used to say, "They should have held on to the textile." Because we were number one in the world one time, Whiting textile. And it started filtering away from us. I'd have thought they could have made the product cheap and done better. Down south, I'm sure they must have had some, ohh, inner arguments among the hierarchy [unclear]. Finally, got rid of it. I mean that's supposedly the decline of this place here. It became, was bought out by White Consolidated. But then White decided that we would just be their uh graphic arts plant. And I don't, even to this day, I think we're having a real rough time because Japanese competition is too fierce. That's my opinion. I'm not the engineer.

R: What do you, this means basically since 1945 then you've got forty-nine hundred bonafide [unclear] workers. (G: Um hm) What are these people doing now?

G: Where are they going to survive, huh. Where [chuckling] are they going to take (- -) (R: Yeah) I don't know! But, well today don't seem to be a problem. [unclear] he's advertising [unclear] help for all kinds of machinists. [unclear]. A lot of them went to [unclear] at the time. Some of them stayed home. I think probably some of the people that were up here were from Woonsocket. [unclear].

R: Well, I'm sure you know that the early eighties [unclear] valley in 1981, 1982, was running eighteen, twenty percent [unclear].

G: Well, [sighs] you know, like I said, we were down to six hundred and you just start going and going and uh, maybe eighty-three, Light and Casting Company went right out. They had about a hundred and twenty-five people at the time.

R: What was the problem do you think? [unclear].

G: They're just part of our local.

R: [unclear].

G: Well, it was inspected and we started laying off and uh, [unclear]. (R: Um hm)

R: The foundry workers aren't necessarily skilled are they?

G: No, but uh, well how many other foundries can you go to? Not too many. If you're out of a job at the foundry, you could get one, because they low, [chuckles] it wasn't exact-, you weren't exactly coming uh, off the wall I mean to get those jobs, you know? (R: Yeah) Molten steel, no, that wasn't uh something people wanted. It was, [unclear].

R: If you just had to try to ballpark guess, say, are all these people making as much as they made in Whittings?

G: That left here?

R: Yeah, what would you say? [unclear].

G: I don't think so. (R: [unclear]) I really don't think so. Unless uh, well some were real boulders. [unclear]

R: What about skilled workers? (G: What about skilled workers?) Do you think they're making as much as they were? Here at Whiting, when they left? You know the machinists.

G: I don't know where they would have found jobs, because Worcester started to slow down, too, and a lot of places [unclear] closed. (R: Um hm) [unclear] jobs around but [unclear]. (R: Yeah) [unclear] I don't know the complex up there now. All these small job shops. (R: Um hm) I don't know. There's a couple of shops up there used to be u-union [unclear].

R: Yeah. Now you talked about collective bargaining [unclear]. What happened when Ronald Reagan came into office?

G: Well, got conservative. Tightened up the uh, well [unclear] look for uh help say, National Labor Relations Board. It suddenly became a conservative outfit you know. It kind of gutted out some of the uh, OSHA people, and that kind of lost its power, where we used to be able to call them in. It was [unclear] the start of a lot of things, too.

R: Did management come to you and ask for concessions?

G: They never got any.

R: That's not what I asked. [chuckles] (G: Hm?) That's not what I asked.

G: Well, I don't know, not big concessions. N- (R: Yeah) No! They did ask us to co-pay our health plan. [unclear] I was strong on that you know. [clears throat] One year, uh, there was, they were in transition, and they were, well, when I say they were in bad shape, they were. Because we do have our [unclear]. We just, just don't take their word. We'd like to see them (- -)

R: Management lets them go through the books? That's amazing. That's, that's absolutely incredible.

G: Yeah, we had a lot of [unclear]. (R: Hm) They uh, it's uh, they don't get up at the union hall and tell you what's happening. They just come in, tell the staff that they verify whether the company is, in dire straits or they're lying to us [unclear]. I don't know if it's something that's done all over, but uh, we came in, yeah we [unclear] at the books. (R: Yeah) Apparently had nothing to hide. They were losing money. (R: Yeah) They had nothing. So, yeah, we passed up a raise one year that we had coming to us.

R: How about layoffs? (G: Hm?) How about layoffs? Did you try and negotiate those?

G: Negotiate layoffs?

R: Yeah, did you try, I know the contract says management has the right to layoff. (G: Yes) But, did you try to change any of that?

G: [pause: 5 sec.] No, the company has the right to(- -) [pause: 5 sec.] We uh, we did have some pretty good sub-contract provisions at one time where they sent the work out. You know. But we lost that in subsequent negotiations and we couldn't [unclear] the government [unclear] (R: Um hm) send out work, across the street if they can get it cheaper. (R: Yeah)

R: What about spread the work programs? Did you try (- -) (G: Uh what?) Spread the work programs. Reduce the hours.

G: No, we did not. [pause: 5 sec.] No, when things slowed down we, the last man in, was the first man out. (R: Um hm) He had opportunities to apply seniority and bump in other departments, but he could do the work and some of the jobs were not skilled, and [unclear] cut in pay.

R: Looking back at the whole, the whole thing, is there anything that you would do differently to stem the tide of job loss or anything?

G: From this office I don't know. Uh, we rely quite heavily on our labor [unclear] staff [unclear].

R: Do you think that's a mistake or do you think that's helpful?

G: Well I think we're uh drawing on their knowledge and uh, what's flown in other places and what hasn't. (R: Yeah) They have a lot to say. You know we've, we've never entertained thoughts of [unclear] on our own.

R: That's the question I was wondering about.

G: [unclear] independent unions [unclear] I don't believe.

R: Not independent unions, but just ones that you know go back to that CIO spirit. I guess that was a different age, wasn't it. (G: That was what?) That was a different age. (G: Perhaps) How would you compare unionism now as when you came into it?

G: Well I think at that time it was done more or less for uh mutual protection. [unclear]. You know here today gone tomorrow thing. (R: Yeah) Now we just uh, try to protect our insurance benefits, you know, anything else that's, likely to lose. Our job, our seniority. Our opportunities to better ourselves. See (- -)

[end of side one]

G: That's what most of our grievances are about. (R: Yeah)

R: Well, I'm wondering uh, [both talk; unclear] Um, I guess the uh, the whole, how, how do you respond, this is what I'm wondering, how do you respond to critics who come between [unclear]. They are the ones who [unclear] problems.

G: [unclear]. Labor is certainly [unclear]. Every time we did get a raise, [unclear] the company's always raised their price, not just to compensate for our wages, but they took that opportunity to, you know, seek more profits. Which the company needs if they're going to keep rebuilding I'm sure [unclear].

R: That's right. Well I, I remember in 1960 John Kennedy, 1961 or two I guess it was, when uh he forced a mediation between the steel workers and uh, the m-, you know, big steel, U.S. Steel and s-, some of the others. And uh, [unclear], and week afterwards big steel announced that they were going to really jump their rates. Were you guys involved in that?

G: No. I mean we weren't involved because we were uh, sort of [unclear]. (R: Right) This was all [unclear] steel [unclear]. [unclear]. (R: Yeah)

R: Have you ever been involved in one of these national strikes? Uh, you know [unclear]. Did they [unclear]?

G: No. We've uh, we've always, you know, sent some financial support [unclear]. [unclear] picket line. [unclear].

[momentary pause in tape; when interview resumes there is additional noise, making tape very difficult to listen to]

G: And it's like, just about everything was against them you know. (R: Yeah) Towards the end. They all seemed to have the spirit. They were all uh, to the last day I mean they were just, [unclear] they still believed in their cause. (R: Yeah) My wife gave a good size check that I mean I had to cut my vacation short. I was surprised but uh, (R: Yeah) [unclear].

R: You, your wife a strong union backer?

G: Uhh, I don't know, she uh, I guess she done a little organizing years ago. Just briefly for the Ladies Garment Workers, but (- -)

R: Was that in this area? (G: Hm?)

G: Worcester area.

R: Worcester area.

G: Yeah. [chuckles] She had uh, they fired her. After that she was all upset. [unclear] signs had to be posted. Nobody is to be discriminated against, you know, and (- -) But she quit.

It was a little heavy for her afterwards. She didn't feel right. She got a job at the Worcester Courthouse where she worked for twenty-five years so [unclear]. [coughs] But uh, no their unionism is, she does all my typing and all correspondence [unclear]. (R: Yeah)

R: Well, you know uh, the Jay workers i-, in the International Paper Campaign, they started a new tactic. They, they took up this corporate campaign, right? How do you feel about these tactics? Do think that's an effective method of protecting collective bargaining?

G: I don't know if it is or isn't, but uh, they must have felt comfortable with it. I mean they're, they're international reps and so forth. [unclear] that decision. (R: Yeah) They, they used to go all over, those people from Jay. They had that big rally. We'd send buses from Worcester to some of their rallies. I had tried to uh get them to come down and picket the Bank of Boston [unclear], and uh they had thought about it, and this is getting towards the end, you know. Funding was [unclear]. [unclear]. Bank of Boston gets a lot of play you know. (R: Yeah) [unclear] too late. (R: Yeah; that's interesting)

R: Any other labor struggles around that uh your local has been involved in?

G: No, not the local so much. [unclear] few people like myself, officers [unclear] council. I've been going there for, well almost as long as I've been in the union here, you know, and (- -) (R: Yeah) We uh, we take part in other strikes in the Worcester area. Just show up [unclear] bodies and just to give it some semblance of strength [unclear]. (R: Yeah) You know. We don't interfere with their [unclear] negotiations.

R: Have you gotten much support from other places when you're going through these bad times?

G: Well, when we uh were on strike (- -)

R: This was in 1983? (G: Um hm) What was the cause of that strike?

G: Well what, where are we now, we're in eighty-nine. (R: Yeah) No that uh, was eighty-five. (R: Eighty-five) What was the cause of that strike? (R: Yeah) It was probably a strike that should never have happened. The company uh, all they, they wanted more productivity. You know. And we thought people were out straight, as much as they could [unclear]. And that was issue [unclear] on strike.

R: How long were you out?

G: Eight weeks. [pause: 5 sec.] There isn't one person in my local that crossed that picket line.

R: How many people do you have [unclear]?

G: At that particular time? We might have had a couple hundred. [pause: 7 sec.] (R: That's good)

R: Did you win the strike?

G: [unclear] slight compromise [unclear]. Now that strike there, this was just for the uh production workers. [both talk; Mr. Guertin unclear]

R: Do they mean just speed up, or what kind of productivity?

G: Well, if you're making twenty pieces an hour they'd like you to make twenty-one. (R: Speed up, yeah) Yeah. I think that was the demise of our product over there. I mean we rushed the product out in the field, and [unclear] you know, and we had a lousy reputation before it was finalized, but we just wanted to sweep the market. (R: Yeah) We're making a good press now, but it takes a while to, you hit a bad publicity and it takes a while to (- -)

R: You were getting ready to talk about the production workers being on strike [unclear].

G: Yeah, I was saying the production workers were on strike. The office union went out with us; supported us. And actually they didn't gain or lose. You know they had their contract. I mean they supported us, and uh, like myself, skilled help, you know we are not on a uh, how much work can you do basis. (R: Yeah; I understand) Yeah uh so I have to say we all went out for maybe, fifty, fifty-five percent of the people. The other uh forty-five, you know they weren't going to gain or lose, but they [unclear]. (R: Yeah) And you, you started this here by asking about support from other locals. So we set up a strike fund. The International sent us some money, and we were able to give everybody a little check every week. We had support from I think seventy-two other locals. They sent money to us.

R: Steel workers or [unclear].

G: Mostly steel workers, but uh, other workers, too.

R: Any unions in particular, locals that you've been working closely with over the years?

G: Well, I remember the first day we were on strike [unclear] gave us a thousand dollars to start. (R: Yeah) [unclear] checks were five hundred. Which we can't reciprocate because we're not that big, but we do send some checks out [unclear] call [unclear] International [unclear].

R: What do you think about the future of the union in your plant?

G: Well, I think everything has its ups and downs, and I think it's going to, it's going to have to survive. I really feel that. You know I just uh, you know I'm very comfortable with the unions. (R: Yeah)

R: What do you think about the future of American uh industrial production? Machine tool or otherwise.

G: [pause: 3 sec.] I think we have a ways to go. I uh, I'm so afraid of foreign competition

and [unclear] as far as technology goes. In our own line. I don't know about the rest [unclear]. [unclear] good price.

R: Do you think management ought to be learning something from all this?

G: They should. [pause: 3 sec.] I know, I know management is fighting amongst themselves, I [unclear] try it my way, no that isn't going to work, try it mine. Management people [unclear], they're in here for a while, and if they're an executive type, they'll put a few years in at one place, they'll move on to something better and uh, every week, every month [unclear]. (R: Yeah)

R: Do you think American workers are more affluent than [unclear].

G: Well over here people got lots of seniority. (R: Yeah) All kinds of [unclear]. I don't think we're like Japan, that we give our life to a company, although I just about did. (R: Yeah) But I always say, "Eh I could probably go someplace else, make an extra buck or two, but (- -)" Every day I go to work, it only takes me ten minutes. (R: Yeah) My time on the road, it's, it's pretty good.

R: Uh, do you have children?

G: I uh only have one at home now. I had three children.

R: Now did you tell them to go to work in the, in Whiting, or anywhere else like Whiting?

G: I didn't tell them anything.

R: You didn't. What did you hope for them to do? (G: Hm?) What did you ex-, what did you want your kids to grow up to do?

G: Probably whatever they wanted to. Although they, they used to say all the time, "Well, where's the union meeting tonight?" I was always out someplace [unclear] grew up. (R: Yeah) But uh, well, my daughter just works in a factory now. She has three children. She talks to me, and live in one of those second floor ten-, five seventy-five a month rent. [unclear]. People just can't get out today. I, I don't know where she's going to go. (R: Yeah)

R: Where, where does she work? (G: Hm?) Locally?

G: No, she works in [unclear].

R: Oh, [unclear].

G: My uh oldest son, he's in Milford Hospital. Paramedic. You know he's done that for years. Teaches at the [unclear] the reserves and stuff like that. I mean he likes that type of work. I have one that's uh in the Post Office. He's in, he lives in Holliston. He's very active in his postal union. (R: Is he in Letter Carriers or um [unclear]; really)

R: I guess what I was, why I asked that question is I was wondering what you think, what kind of lives you think uh the union [unclear].

G: Well, [if the dreams of these eyes ever fulfill, I mean your ideas and people have others you know. (R: Yeah) [pause: 5 sec.] [unclear] comfortable in life, with their families and [unclear]. (R: Yeah) My younger son, he's, [unclear] place up in Maine. Way up. Wilderness. So he plans to [unclear]. That's all he does is you know [chuckling] tell him to put his fishing [unclear]. It's a job [unclear] lumber mill or something [unclear]. It's all right as long as he don't get married. I mean, what he does, I don't know how he would support a family up there, but (- -) (R: Yeah) People up there seem to get by. [pause: 5 sec.]

R: Well, what do you, what do you think your uh, your work has meant to you, over the years?

G: It's been a good base for me, you know. [chuckles] It's a stre-, good steady job, going in there, maintenance machinist. Uh it's a fairly skilled job. And you have to [unclear] the hydraulics, the [unclear] and everything. It's a good job. (R: Yeah) And uh, union's meant something to me, too, because I've been to so many conferences. I go to seminars, schools and (- -) (R: Yeah) There are more boards than I care to be downtown here. [laughing] Yeah, it's been a, it's been a good life; something I liked. But I get involved.

R: Well, you, you tell me all about all these things you go to, but, but I mean what has it meant to you? You said involvement. Is it, is this on a political level, or on a social, or an activist level?

G: Political act-, you can touch all three bases on that you know. (R: Yeah) Yeah ah (- -) Town Democratic [unclear], party hold it's meeting here. Politicians come to town, they come to the union office first. Uhh (- -) (R: It's interesting, yeah)

R: Have you got anything you want to add to that?

G: [unclear] ramble on, really.

R: Well there is structure in this, believe it or not.

G: There is? (R: Yeah)

R: I, I have a general pattern I ask everybody [unclear]. Later on when I write the book, I'll be able to put [unclear]. Anyway (- -)

G: No it's a, it's been a sense of pride to me. (R: Yeah, I can see that) But when the uh (- -) Well, you're walking in the office in the plant, or anybody, no matter who the fellow is you know, you [chuckle], doors are all open to you. (R: [unclear]) Not just to me but to uh, union officer, or any-, well just anybody really, if they're having a, [unclear] occasion to be around, have any questions asked. We do get around more than the others. (R: Yeah) Uhh, you know

you just walk into any door and uh [unclear] observing, anybody, it's though, not this to this [unclear], everything's on a first name basis no matter who the person is.

R: Even with the President of ATF?

G: Oh absolutely. You can't go say Mr. So-and-so. You don't want to put yourself down. You can be, you got to be right there, [unclear].

R: It's interesting. Yeah. I get a sense of power in this relationship then that (- -)

G: Uhh, I f-, I don't feel it.

R: What about dignity? (G: Hm?) Do you get a sense of dignity?

G: Dignity is [unclear]. (R: Yeah) We have rights. Um, maybe it's been [unclear]. We have uh, we have rights to our job as long as we perform it well and, you know. (R: Yeah; that's interesting)

[end of tape]